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Endless Novelty: Specialty Production and American Industrialization, 1865-1925

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Endless Novelty: Specialty Production and American Industrialization, 1865-1925, by Philip Scranton. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. xiv, 415 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, index. \$39.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY MARK FINLAY, ARMSTRONG ATLANTIC STATE UNIVERSITY

Virtually any popular book or video that traces American business history will suggest that Henry Ford's system of assembly lines, routinized labor, and mass production symbolizes the might and the modernity of American industry in the early twentieth century. Other histories have traced the origins of industrial efficiency and mass production to other cases, such as the Lowell textile mills, the meat disassembly lines at Procter and Gamble, the Pennsylvania Railroad, or the steel and petroleum industries. According to this established orthodoxy in American business and technological history, innovative technologies, the division and deskilling of labor, a strict attention to business management, aggressive marketing strategies, and cutthroat price competition permitted the giants of American industry to prosper.

Without rejecting this model entirely, Philip Scranton demonstrates persuasively that the paradigm is "seriously incomplete and fundamentally flawed" (6). Scranton suggests that historians' fallacious tendency to focus on the larger and more visible firms that strove for mass production has obscured their vision of the smaller and more common firms that remained committed to strategies of "specialty production." Unlike the well-known mass and bulk producers, specialty producers prospered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by filling custom or batch orders. Diverging from the strategies of larger firms, specialty producers sought respectful relationships with their highly skilled and highly valued employees, marketed their products on the basis of quality and style rather than price, and used trade associations and other collaborative measures to bring a degree of stability to their market sectors.

Scranton develops this thesis within an interwoven narrative that links Philadelphia's fancy textile producers, Providence's jewelry shops, Cincinnati's machine tool builders, and a dozen other examples of mid-sized industries. Supported with abundant data from manufacturing censuses, trade journals, advertisements, and archival material, the text illustrates how specialty manufacturers deliberately avoided the trends of the infamous larger firms. By offering customers "endless novelty" through a wide variety of products, responding flexibly to changing market circumstances, working cooperatively to train and keep skilled laborers, and sharing the marketplace with similar firms that clustered in integrated industrial districts, these companies demonstrated that specialty production was just as "rational" as mass production.

Although his book focuses on an urban context that is not directly related to the history of Iowa, Scranton argues forcefully for a more sophisticated understanding of industrialization in the Midwest. Borrowing from the literature of historical and economic geography, Scranton maintains that midwestern industries did not simply mimic eastern models. Rather, the Midwest experienced an "agro-industrial revolution" (133) based on links and exchanges among agricultural resources, rural customers, and regional manufacturing. On one level, rural Americans' demand for staple and inexpensive goods made the Midwest a logical home for mass producers such as Henry Ford. On another, the Midwest became a locus for agro-industrial processors and other specialty manufacturers that found niche markets in the "underappreciated" "Middletowns" (140) of the region. The furniture industry in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for example, took off in the 1880s after local firms established the Grand Rapids Furniture Manufacturers' Association. Interfirm alliances helped maintain control over the skilled labor force, negotiated for favorable railroad rates, colluded on pricing strategies, and successfully marketed the city's reputation for fine quality furniture. In brief, the case illustrates the dynamism of the midwestern economy and shows that there was more to America's industrialization than interchangeable parts, management flow charts, and cutthroat competition.

Scranton's narrative is both dense and nuanced. The text is packed with enough persuasive examples and clear signposts to keep readers focused on the thesis, although there are somewhat lengthy digressions into taxonomies of the various subsets of specialty producers. As a whole, the book is an impressive achievement that should prompt other historians to follow Scranton's call to search for the synergy of smaller firms and inconspicuous industrial regions. In time, even popular histories of American industry, technology, and business will devote more attention to the specialty producers that Scranton has celebrated, and rethink the role of Henry Ford.

Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood, by Gary Cross. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. vii, 283 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PAMELA RINEY-KEHRBERG, ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Some books just beg to be read. Gary Cross's *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* is one of those books. With its blue cover and colorful Romper Room lettering, featuring an enor-

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